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The Ambivalence of Tradition in Rachel Kadish's *The Weight of Ink*[*]

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Abstract

The ambivalence at the heart of Rachel Kadish's third novel, *The Weight of Ink* (2017), comes from the tension between Kadish's exploration of Jewish identity, on the one hand, and her position as a feminist on the other. Kadish thus uses the form of the historical novel to critique patriarchal traditions in Jewish culture that exclude women from the domain of scholarship and philosophical thought. *The Weight of Ink* weaves a complex narrative contrasting the life of a twenty-first-century historian, Helen Watt, to the fierce intellect of Ester Velazquez, a female scribe from the seventeenth century, who is forced to develop her philosophy secretly under a series of male pseudonyms. This essay starts out by examining the delicate balance required for this kind of cultural critique, for while Kadish excoriates the past ill-treatment of women and homosexuals, she nonetheless is also clearly proud of her identity as a Jewish woman. The second section of this paper looks at the extent to which Kadish launches a successful feminist analysis of Jewish culture and traditions. Her strongest points come when she turns the logic of this tradition back on itself: the very existence of Ester's intellect or Alvaro's homosexuality, she argues, are proof that such things are ordained by divine will rather than its contradiction. The conclusion of the paper explores the limitations of Kadish's approach, focusing in particular on the way she creates a biological tie between Ester and Shakespeare. This narrative twist appropriates Ester to the realm of the patriarchal law, encapsulating the irresolvable tension between Kadish's Jewishness and her feminist politics.

Keywords

Jewishness, tradition, Shakespeare, feminism, Spinoza

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Rachel Kadish's widely-praised third novel *The Weight of Ink* (2017) is a work of historical fiction set in London in the 1660s, a premise that connects it to a number of trends in contemporary literature. "Historical drama," Agnes Heller reminds us, "was born with Shakespeare," then entered the realm of the novel in the nineteenth century in the works of Walter Scott, and experienced its most recent revival, according to Heller, from the success of postmodern works like Umberto Eco's *The Name of the Rose* (1980) (88). This latest iteration of historical fiction has produced distinct categories of its own, from postcolonial novels like Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* (1981) and Zadie Smith's *White Teeth* (2000) to neo-Victorian novels such as A. S. Byatt's *Possession* (1990) and Sarah Waters's *Tipping the Velvet* (1998). While a spate of recent studies by Kate Mitchell, Louisa Hadley, John Glendening, and Kym Brindle have helped to define and explain the current fascination with the Victorian period, Kadish's choice of Restoration England as a historical setting is equally popular among writers of fiction, despite not having received the same level of critical attention. The depth of this interest in the Restoration period is evidenced by Rose Tremain's *Restoration* (1989) and its sequel, *Merivel: A Man of His Time* (2012), Jeanette Winterson's *Sexing the Cherry* (1989), Iain Pears's *An Instance of the Fingerpost* (1998), Geraldine Brooks's *Year of Wonders* (2001), and Neal Stephenson's *Baroque Cycle* trilogy, especially its first installment *Quicksilver* (2003). This impressive list of novels invites readers to regard *The Weight of Ink* as a continuation of this particular strand of recent historical fiction.

Because she is an American, Kadish's decision to explore this particular time and place may seem unusual—after all, the Restoration period is mainly of importance to British history. This apparent anomaly is explained by the fact that Jewish identity has always been one of the central themes of Kadish's work, and the Restoration period was when Jews began returning to England after an exile of nearly four hundred years. In her difficult but engaging first novel *From a Sealed Room* (1998), similarly, an abusive relationship between an American woman (Maya) and an Israeli man (Gil) is used as a complex metaphor to show how past traumas continue to affect the Jewish psyche. Kadish followed this up with the much lighter *Tolstoy Lied* (2006), a romance about a Jewish academic, Tracy, who is determined to counter the prevailing pessimism of modern literature in her quest for lasting love. Kadish's deployment of historical fiction in *The Weight of Ink* is, therefore, a new permutation in her ongoing exploration of Jewish identity, one that seeks to examine deeper philosophical questions about this cultural legacy through the lens of a critical feminism that is the other dominant feature of Kadish's work. Indeed, it is the

inherent tension between Jewish tradition and modern feminism that creates a sense of ambivalence at the heart of this latest novel.

Like many other recent works of historical fiction, *The Weight of Ink* uses the archive as the central device for exploring this contestation. As such, the novel opens with the discovery of a trove of seventeenth-century papers, written in Hebrew and Portuguese, which was discovered while renovating the suburban London home of an affluent couple, Ian and Bridgette Easton. The Eastons call upon Helen Watt, a professor of Jewish history who is on the verge of retirement, and her new American graduate assistant, Aaron Levy, to examine the documents. They quickly discover that the majority of the papers were written for the respected Rabbi HaCoen Mendes by a scribe under the rubric of "Aleph." Further investigation shows that this Aleph is, against all conventions and expectations, a young Jewish woman, Ester Velasquez, who migrated from Amsterdam to London in 1657 following the death of her parents in a house fire. They are further surprised to discover that not only was Ester acting as a scribe, a position expressly forbidden to women, she was also in correspondence with several leading intellectual figures of her time, most notably the excommunicated Jewish philosopher Baruch de Spinoza.

As the storyline alternates between the seventeenth and twenty-first centuries, Kadish uses the existence of the archive to contemplate crucial questions about how cultural conditions shape the lives of her characters, focusing especially on the feminist issue of how society traditionally limits the ability of women to engage in intellectual pursuits. While this question arises in the context of Kadish's examination of Jewishness and her questioning of traditional positions on issues such as gender and homosexuality, Helen nonetheless firmly reminds Aaron that this "is not a *Jewish* story. This story, whatever it proves to be, belongs to all of us" (Kadish, *Weight* 214; emphasis in original). Since *The Weight of Ink* quite obviously *is* a Jewish story—after all, it won the 2018 Jewish Fiction Award from the Association of Jewish Libraries on this very basis—what Kadish means by Helen's line is that this novel is not *exclusively* Jewish, that its lessons are universal. In her earlier novel *Tolstoy Lied*, Kadish makes a similar universalizing move in her interpretation of feminism as equivalent to the freedom to make one's own choices: "There's no such thing as a *feminist choice* . . . That's redundant. Feminism *means* having a choice. And feminism doesn't care which choices you make, either. Just that you have them. . . . The point is to make sure you can give yourself—or *not* give yourself—of your free will" (*Tolstoy*, 317; emphasis in original). In *The Weight of Ink*, this general right to question one's tradition is a path attributed historically in the novel to Spinoza, whose expulsion from the Jewish community provides the novel with its justification

for exploring the contested nature of the modern subject's relationship to the larger community.

The weight of tradition that Kadish explores throughout her novel is bound up, in particular, with the written archive of Jewish history. The forceful imprint of thousands of years of histories, laws, and commentaries forms an impressive tradition that demands respect for its sheer breadth and longevity. At the same time, this archive of remarkable richness can also appear suffocating due to its magnitude. In a meditation on his ambivalent relationship to his own Jewishness, Jacques Derrida dissects the simultaneous feelings of love and oppression that such an archive creates by comparing it to the contradictory meanings of the French idiomatic construction "*en mal de*."

> The *trouble de l'archive* stems from a *mal d'archive*. We are *en mal d'archive*: in need of archives. Listening to the French idiom, and in it the attribute *en mal de*, to be *en mal d'archive* can mean something else than to suffer from a sickness, from a trouble or from what the noun *mal* might name. It is to burn with a passion. (Derrida 91)

To have "*mal d'archive*"—the original French title of *Archive Fever* (1995)—articulates the dual connotation of being sick as a result of the archive, while at the same time also burning with passion for it. The ambiguity of the human relationship to tradition, for Derrida, thus arises from this dual impulse to preserve the traditions of the past that have shaped our identities, while at the same time harboring a secret longing to be free of the weight of their historical imposition.

This same spirit of ambivalence appears throughout *The Weight of Ink*, which draws the reader into its narrative with its mixture of simultaneous appreciation and critique of this archive. Kadish heightens this sensation through the novel's pointed references to Shakespeare's Sonnet 147. At the beginning of Part 2, for instance, Kadish quotes the opening two lines of this poem: "*My love is a fever, longing still* / *For that which longer nurseth the disease*" (Kadish, *Weight* 108; italicized in original). As in Derrida's example, the central metaphor of the sonnet hinges on two conflicting desires that pull the poet in opposite directions. The normally positive act of loving, by being compared to a fever, is given a negative connotation. As the sonnet unfolds, the power of this destructive love grows to the point of madness. The poet's reason, which normally acts as his metaphorical "physician," abandons him out of frustration, leaving the poet to suffer from a poisoned desire that, by the sonnet's closing lines, has reversed the usual symbolic values of light and dark, evil

and virtue: "For I have sworn thee fair and thought thee bright / Who art as black as hell, as dark as night" (Shakespeare, *Complete* 675). The same metaphor resonates throughout *The Weight of Ink*, particularly when Kadish is describing Ester's passion for studying: "The learning that spooled from Ester's hand made her feverish" (Kadish, *Weight* 179). This symbolism is given a further twist when, later in the novel, Ester contracts the plague and so suffers from a genuine (rather than a metaphorical) fever. Her condition is so grave that she longs to die, and while she does recover, the extremity of the experience causes her to rethink her earlier dualistic, Cartesian position on the connection between body and mind. The collapse of the distance between the symbolic fever of learning and the actual fever of the plague, in short, help her to understand the monism of Spinoza's philosophy, launching the mature period of her thought that leads, in turn, to her dramatic exchanges with the leading philosophers of her time.

Like Spinoza, Shakespeare looms large in *The Weight of Ink*. Shakespeare, after all, is a notable disrupter of tradition, for while he is now widely regarded, in the words of Harold Bloom, as the "Center of the Canon," this grand legacy stems from the fact that he revolutionized drama and poetry in ways that broke with the traditions of his time (Bloom 43-71). Throughout *The Weight of Ink*, Kadish alludes to the subtle shades of meaning that Shakespeare uses to generate ambivalence. The novel's epigraph, for instance, is drawn from another of his poems, Sonnet 71: "*Nay, if you read this line, remember not* / *The hand that writ it*" (Kadish, *Weight* 1; italicized in original). If we restrict ourselves to these two quoted lines, the poet's words seem to refer to a straightforward desire to be forgotten. A closer look at the sonnet, however, shows this limited reading to be misleading. For while the poet does indeed exhort the object of his affection, the Fair Youth, to "let your love even with my life decay," the overall tone of the poem is disingenuous: the poet may *say* that he wants to be forgotten, but the sonnet's subtext suggests that the poem was created precisely as a tribute to the memory of his love (Shakespeare, *Complete* 523). Just like in Sonnet 147, the poet finds himself pulled in different directions by conflicting desires.

Kadish returns to Sonnet 71 at key moments in the novel in order to connect it to some of the emotional dilemmas of her own characters. We learn, for instance, that Helen's lifelong renunciation of love and companionship is the bitter fallout of her youthful romance with Dror, an Israeli she met while on a post-war kibbutz. Dror, who lost family members in the Holocaust, has signed up as an Israeli covert operative to try and prevent such a terrible event from ever happening again. With naïve good intentions, he attempts to educate Helen about the brutal history of Jewish persecution, although his insistence on teaching her in this way feels highhanded and

creates an emotional distance between them. Bullying by the other kibbutz members and misunderstandings between the two lovers eventually cause Helen to return abruptly to England, effectively ending her relationship with Dror and, indeed, her romantic life. When, years later, she learns of Dror's death in a car accident, she finds herself recalling the same lines from Sonnet 71 quoted in the novel's epigraph. "She'd readily have sacrificed her place in Dror's heart—erased all memory of herself—if it would have eased him," writes Kadish. "But Dror had never forgotten her. Of that she was certain" (*Weight* 241). Helen thus imagines herself in the position of the poet, addressing the "fair youth" Dror—for that is the image of him she retains in her mind—wishing that his memory of her could be sacrificed in exchange for relieving him of the pain of their lost love.

Kadish sets up an implicit parallel between Helen's failed romance and Aaron's tenuous connection to Marisa, a woman with whom he has a brief but intense relationship just before the novel's opening. This association is reinforced, in particular, by Aaron's physical resemblance to Helen's former lover: "Yes, Aaron Levy bore a physical resemblance to someone—someone she'd cared for very much," writes Kadish (18). A few pages later, she elaborates: "Yes, Dror had had those same tight curls, those almond eyes. But how different. For just an instant, then, Dror's face was before her: his sun-browned skin, his jaw, his lips speaking, unhesitating and unsparing" (21). The parallel continues when Marisa, whose grandparents survived the Holocaust, goes on a kibbutz, keeping in touch with Aaron via a series of sporadic and awkward emails. To this point in his life something of a womanizer, Aaron is surprised by the depth of his feelings for Marisa, and is further bewildered when she decides to break off all communication with him, a move that triggers a reassessment of his life and personality. In a moment of reflection, he rereads Sonnet 71, only to find himself confused and upset by its meaning.

> Staring at the lines, he'd felt a sudden gust of anger. Yet again, he didn't fucking get it. Or maybe Shakespeare was bullshitting. Wasn't love, by definition, the wish to be remembered? Nowhere in Aaron's notion of love was there anything remotely resembling the willingness to erase himself for the sake of the other's ease. No matter; Marisa had erased Aaron without his help, for her own ease. (295-96)

Marisa's abrupt withdrawal forces Aaron to confront his own selfishness, a move that proves crucial when she finally contacts him to let him know that she is pregnant with his child. Marisa's strategy of pushing Aaron away, then inviting him back after a

spell, gives him the space to develop the maturity required for the challenges that lie ahead of them both as a couple.

The hand that appears in Sonnet 71 provides the novel with one of its many symbols of ambivalence, something that simultaneously beckons and pushes away, creates and destroys, serves and betrays. Ester, for instance, repeatedly contemplates her hands, which are used both in her service as a scribe for the rabbi (community) and for writing down her own philosophical ideas (individual). The rabbi eventually becomes convinced that being his scribe is holding back Ester's chances of getting married, and so he relegates her to household duties. In response, she manufactures news of a religious crisis in Florence, forcing the rabbi to deploy her writing skills once again and providing a new cover under which to continue her studies. Nonetheless, she feels enormous guilt because of this act of betrayal:

> She spread her palms on the writing table's cool, smooth surface. Did these hands belong to her? The very words she'd once hurled at her brother accused her: *You ask me to spit on the one man who's helped us*. Yet how easily she betrayed the rabbi now. (273; emphasis in original)

The rabbi, meanwhile, harbors his own sense of guilt: when he was tortured by the Inquisition, he said something (he cannot remember what) to betray his fellow Jews, leading to his subsequent release, blinded but alive. Rather than darkness, he confides to Ester that the ambivalent image which haunts his unseeing eyes is the broken body of his mother, a sight he longs to forget. "I have wished each day that I could stop seeing her," he says. "Even if it meant forgetting her beloved face forever" (405). The rabbi's former patron, Benjamin HaLevy, experiences similarly mixed emotions when he loses his cherished eldest son Manuel to the plague, forcing him reluctantly to retrieve his homosexual younger son, Alvaro, from exile and disgrace. While Alvaro is quick to forgive his dying father, when the son stretches out his hand in reconciliation "the old man could only bat away with a circling, trembling hand—a veined, papery hand that pushed away and beckoned, pushed away and beckoned" (515). As these examples demonstrate, the motif of conflicted ambivalence, often symbolized by a hand, appears even in those scenes in which the sonnet is not referenced directly.

Ambivalence is thus set up in the novel as the appropriate tone for dealing, in particular, with the thorny questions of the past, of tradition, of the archive. The "error" that marks the novel's four central characters is their youthful enthusiasm, an

idealism that leads them to romanticize religion, philosophy, and history in ways that cause them to develop some all-too-familiar blind spots. Marisa provides a crucial rebuttal, for instance, to Aaron's naïveté about his chosen discipline of history when he writes idealistically to her about how we should become better human beings by learning from the past.

> Marisa, granddaughter of Holocaust survivors. Her fierce words about memory felt like the key to something important they might have in common.
>
> He typed:
>
> I think about this a great deal: If we looked through the eyes of history, we'd live differently. We'd live right.
>
> —A
>
> He pressed Send. Then, unwilling to close his laptop, he pretended to engage his mind with other things that would please Helen, looking up definitions of archaic Portuguese words he already knew while his e-mail window remained open on his screen.
>
> Three minutes, four, five.
>
> His screen blinked. A reply from Marisa. He opened it. The e-mail was one line long.
>
> If I looked through the eyes of history, I wouldn't want to live. (95)

Marisa's reply is, of course, hyperbolic—taken by itself, it is too pessimistic, too nihilistic—but its rhetorical overkill is meant as a corrective to Aaron's all-too-rosy platitude. Purging life of its ambiguities is to impose a trap on oneself, as Kadish's characters find out to their detriment: Helen, for instance, realizes that the success of her academic career came from sacrificing her romantic life after the split with Dror, a lesson that Ester, anxious to distinguish herself from her sexually liberal mother, also learns for herself. The novel's male characters are much slower at grasping this principle—Aaron repeatedly comments that he does not really understand Shakespeare, for instance, while the rabbi dies within the confines of his religion, even though he has been exposed to the revolutionary minds of both Ester and Spinoza.

Indeed, this issue of gender, of the place of women within Jewish culture and learning, is a question of patriarchal tradition that is also filtered through the novel's Shakespearean motifs. In an interview discussing *The Weight of Ink*, Kadish talks

about how one of the key inspirations for the story came from her contemplation of Virginia Woolf's famous question, posed in the essay/lecture *A Room of One's Own* (1929), as to what would have happened if Shakespeare had a sister, Judith. Kadish explains:

> Woolf's answer is she died without writing a word. . . . I kept asking the question, what would it have taken for a woman like that not to die without writing a word? Is there a way it would have been possible? Just as there are intelligent, passionate women today, there were then. And were all of them defeated, or would some of them have found a way around things? I grew up among Jewish Holocaust refugees and I was intrigued by the question, what if this woman had other strikes against her? What if she were Jewish from an Inquisition refugee background, because that was going on in Shakespeare's day as well. (Dowling)

The novel tackles such questions by examining critically the structural gender prejudices in Jewish culture. When Ester visits the bookstores in London, for example, she is struck by how the Jewish reverence for the sacred texts excludes women from learning.

> All about her, strangers slid their fingers along lines of print, their touch curious, reverent, even tender. How intimate the love of books had always seemed to Ester; yet among Jews the holiest of books could not be touched by human hands. No woman could approach the Torah, and even a man could touch its scrolls only with a wood or silver pointer. Here, though among the Gentiles, even the holiest words could be caressed. (Kadish, *Weight* 176)

Such circumstances lead Ester to regard the spheres of female domesticity and male learning as incompatible opposites. When Manuel HaLevy, attracted by the force of her personality, makes Ester an unexpected proposal of marriage, she therefore turns him down. Manuel regards Ester as "unnatural" and wonders how she can "refuse to be a woman," but her decision is straightforward enough. "A woman's body, said the world, was a prison in which her mind must wither," a condition that Ester is determined to avoid (292-293). What is most challenging about this prejudice is that it comes from *inside* Jewish culture—in an atmosphere of persecution created by the

Inquisition, even the most pertinent critique of this kind might be perceived as a threat, as demonstrated by the historical case of Spinoza. This tension is also central to Rebecca Goldstein's book *Betraying Spinoza* (2006), a text that Kadish acknowledges as a key influence on *The Weight of Ink*, in which Goldstein explores the conflicted relationship between Spinoza and his Jewish origins. "He is, paradoxically, Jewish at the core," she claims, "a core that necessitated, for him, the denial of such a thing as a Jewish core" (Goldstein 178). To criticize one's own culture is a sensitive, ambivalent process, one that often requires, as Kadish puts it in the same interview, "some sort of elaborate deception" (Dowling).

Kadish's interest in how modernity has affected the ability of women to speak for themselves is reflected in the various female characters that appear in *The Weight of Ink*. The most obvious comparison in this respect is between Ester and Helen, for although Helen is able to pursue her intellectual interests in a way that Ester could not, she, too, struggles to reconcile conflicting social expectations about romance, domesticity, and her academic career, not to mention the snide sexism of some of her colleagues. Kadish provides the reader with several further points of female comparison: the stoicism of the rabbi's servant Rivka, for instance, conceals an unexpected profundity and appreciation for learning; Ester's associate Mary has hidden talents that find their secret expression in her embroidery; the two Patricias, stern guardians of the library, are a mirror reflection of Helen's decision to become an ascetic scholar; Anne Fielding, the shy clerk at the local records office, is ignored and overlooked because of her introversion; and Marisa Herz, whose equanimity and self-confidence appear to constitute Kadish's aspirational ideal in the novel. *The Weight of Ink* shows us a world in which, despite the existence of ongoing prejudices, it is increasingly possible for women to have a voice. Since they have "a choice" grounded in "free will" (Kadish, *Tolstoy* 317), the modern woman thus fulfills the core principle of Kadish's feminism as laid down in *Tolstoy Lied*, a position that sits awkwardly with her evocation of Spinoza, who famously compares the human belief in free will to a stone that, having being hurled through the air, naively believes that it has "chosen" to move forward (Spinoza 390). The implicit tension between these two philosophical positions remains unresolved in *The Weight of Ink.*

Kadish's exploration of these complex issues of identity and self-expression often leads the reader to confront some difficult and unsavory ethical questions. Consider, for instance, the novel's examination of how modernity has adapted and modernized (rather than abolished) the insidious prejudices of anti-Semitism, an issue that is again filtered through the work of Shakespeare. In *The Weight of Ink*, Aaron is the character primarily interested in the link between Shakespeare and Jewish

culture, this topic having been the focus of the doctoral dissertation he put on hold in order to study the newly-discovered archive. Aaron struggles to understand Shakespeare, whether it is the notion of sacrificing oneself for love in Sonnet 71 or Prospero's relinquishment of his powers at the end of *The Tempest*. His research leads him to probe the origins of *The Merchant of Venice*, the play that contains Shakespeare's most infamous Jewish character, Shylock. Shylock is a creation that continues to generate controversy, for it remains unclear whether Shakespeare is affirming or critiquing anti-Semitic prejudices with this character. "In our interviews we found no two people who agreed about the nature of Shylock's inner life, whether it was the inner life of a victim or a scoundrel, whether it revealed a tragic hero or a comic villain," observes the British author Howard Jacobson. "But whatever position people took, the conversation was never idly academic. To argue about Shylock is to argue about a matter of contemporary concern" (qtd. in Merritt). Indeed, this position is reiterated in Jacobson's own recent novel *Shylock Is My Name* (2016), in which the reanimated ghost of Shylock laments the ambivalent place he has come to occupy in the Jewish imagination: "These Jews, Leah, these Jews! They don't know whether to cry for me, disown me or explain me! Just as they don't know whether to explain or disown themselves" (Jacobson 191-92). In *The Merchant of Venice*, Shakespeare gives the Jews a voice, albeit a ventriloquized one, yet he puts it in the mouth of such a compromised character that the value of the gesture becomes deeply problematic.

In *The Weight of Ink*, by contrast, Kadish leans toward the sanguine view that gaining a voice is an inherently positive step toward liberation, that if only women, Jews, minorities, homosexuals, and other historically-oppressed groups were allowed to speak, the world would become an inherently more ethical place. Contemporary critics have tended to be more ambivalent about this possibility, from Michel Foucault's critique of the "repressive hypothesis" in *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction* (1976) to Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's meditation on postcolonial subjectivity in "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (1988). These works present the alternative view that, while newly liberated voices are indeed capable of disrupting and challenging injustice, they are also equally susceptible to ideological corruption and collaboration. This phenomenon can be observed in Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, for instance, when the monstrous Caliban famously curses Prospero for teaching him how to speak: "You taught me language, and my profit on't / Is I know how to curse. The red plague rid you / For learning me your language!" (Shakespeare, *Tempest* 26-27). As with Shylock, the historical reception of Caliban has since shifted from villain to anti-hero. In his play *A Tempest* (1969), for instance, Aimé Césaire reworks Shakespeare's original drama by turning Caliban into a colonial subject whose voice

has been distorted by ideology and racism, a rereading of the original text that has become a staple of postcolonial criticism. Jeanette Winterson, similarly, gives Caliban a queer twist by quoting these lines in the opening of her novel *Written on the Body* (1992), lamenting how the language of love that her narrator has learned is as much a curse as it is a blessing. The key insight that comes from the characters of Caliban and Shylock, then, is that while being denied a voice may be a negative act of oppression, the reverse of this situation, in which one gains the ability to speak, is never unambiguously positive.

The most effective ethical maneuvers in *The Weight of Ink* thus occur when Kadish mirrors the injustices of Jewish culture back onto itself: the treatment of Ester (as a woman) and Alvaro (as a homosexual) by their fellow Jews hypocritically replicates the pattern of oppression the Jews have suffered at the hands of an anti-Semitic society. Echoing Caliban's speech, the notion of a curse is a motif that is also taken up in Kadish's novel, beginning with Helen's relationship with Dror. When the two of them sit down to discuss the Jewish history he has asked her to read, he places the emphasis on the negative side of this past, of "how things changed without change" and how "it only gets worse—how the trap closes harder each time," until he finally asks her: "Helen, *why* do you want this in your life?" (Kadish, *Weight* 171; emphasis in original). Despite his apparent good intentions, Dror does not perceive that his sincerity is too unrelentingly harsh for an inexperienced young woman like Helen. The recounting of the brutal history of the Jews comes across as a disingenuous attempt to push her away, leaving Helen to believe that "you want me to think loving you is a curse" (171). The use of the word "curse" resonates still more strongly in the case of Alvaro. Before his homosexuality has been revealed, for instance, he has a conversation with Ester in which he all but tells her his secret: "'I'm cursed,' he whispered to Ester. 'I shall never have what I wish,'" a near-confession that is followed by the repetition, a few lines later, of the words "I'm cursed" (231). When Alvaro is discovered shortly afterward in bed with another man, Ester is sent by the rabbi to the HaLevy house with a note advocating for mercy. Upon her arrival, Alvaro says to her: "You know now what I am. . . . I wished always to tell you. Now you know it. My father's house is cursed with a buggerer" (287). In both cases, Kadish argues for compassion and understanding on the basis that Ester and Alvaro are simply fulfilling the nature given to them by God. "Yet though I saw myself straying ever farther from the path laid before me," reasons Ester in her final letter, "I cried out then and still: why say woman may not follow her nature if it lead her to think, for must not even the meanest beast follow its nature? And why forbid woman or man from questioning what we are taught, for is not intelligence holy?" (529). Ester

thus captures the logic of Jewish theodicy in a circular contradiction of its own making: how can a woman who thinks and studies, or a man who loves other men, be against God's will, a curse rather than a blessing, when such things are evidently the product of his divine will? Rather than stepping outside Jewish law or tradition, Kadish points powerfully in these instances to the quality of mercy that is the true heart of Jewish ethics.

The novel's final twist is the revelation that Ester is actually Shakespeare's granddaughter, for whom Kadish manufactures a different fate than what Woolf imagined for Shakespeare's hypothetical sister. This narrative turn raises the question of essence versus performance, for whatever mask that Ester puts on, whether it is a pseudonym or a gender role, she has the option of taking it off again. This performative dimension of identity is central to much of *The Weight of Ink*, with Kadish cleverly aligning the metafictional concerns of the postmodern novel with the celebrated metaphor about the world as a stage that Shakespeare first articulates near the beginning of *The Merchant of Venice*:

> I hold the world but as the world, Gratiano;
> A stage where every man must play a part,
> And mine a sad one. (72-73)

The comparison reappears in Shakespeare's 1599 comedy *As You Like It*—"All the world's a stage, / And all the men and women merely players" (66)—and when the Globe theater was opened, also in 1599, its reputed motto was "*Totus Mundus Agit Histrionem*" (Gillies 76). The metaphor does not originate with Shakespeare, with Erasmus using it in his *Praise of Folly* (1511), for instance, while Marjorie Garber, in *Profiling Shakespeare* (2008), traces the Globe's Latin motto back to a twelfth-century treatise (Garber 292). For the characters in *The Weight of Ink*, this insight into the performative nature of human existence has a decidedly political dimension, with characters often required to hide who they are for the sake of their own safety—Mary, for instance, regularly wears a crucifix in public to conceal her Jewish identity. Ester, similarly, is inspired by the cross-dressing woman she sees on the London stage, with Kadish implying that this empowering experience is what inspires Ester to write her philosophical letters under male pseudonyms (her initial choice of pseudonym, notably, is taken from the actor Thomas Farrow). The inherent ambivalence of this kind of performativity gives Kadish's characters and narrative an edge of critical subversion.

The politics of *The Weight of Ink*, especially its feminist critique, undergoes a crucial shift when Kadish reveals the final "truth" of Ester's lineage, the revelation that she is Shakespeare's granddaughter. Kadish uses this twist as just another part of the novel's metafictional game: it allows her to dramatically recast Ester's grandmother, for instance, in the historical role of the Dark Lady, the addressee of Sonnets 127 to 154, "his *woman color'd ill* with eyes *raven black*" (Kadish, *Weight* 554; emphasis in original). Kadish thus plays on the various theories surrounding Shakespeare's identity, for a lack of reliable historical records about his life has led to speculation about who really wrote his work, a gap in the archive that Kadish exploits for the sake of her fiction. The reader also realizes retrospectively that Shakespeare has made a surreptitious cameo in the course of *The Weight of Ink* during a conversation between Mary and Ester about love and determinism, in which Ester recounts how her grandmother, Lizabeta, was married to a merchant from Lisbon, but conducted a passionate love affair with an unnamed Englishmen while visiting London:

> My mother said it was a love that made both rue that they were bound in wedlock to others. He was a man not high-born, but vaunted for his wit and perception in all he created. Yet he was restless in all that might cage him. As was my grandmother. But in the end they brought each other only torment. My grandmother, Lizabeta, returned to Lisbon with child. (189)

The female side of Ester's family provides the reader with a microcosm of the ambivalence of the archive, each generation of women trying to disrupt the pattern created by the woman that precedes them. The grandmother, Lizabeta, follows her heart by falling in love with Shakespeare, but the affair ends in tragedy when he unwittingly sends her back to face the Inquisition in Portugal. Ester's mother, Constantina, is determined to learn from this mistake: she marries her husband, Samuel Velasquez, on the understanding that their union is one of economic expedience. "*I reshaped my heart, Ester, so as to be no fool*," she tells her daughter, conducting extra-marital affairs without shame in order to demonstrate that she is the one in control of her desires (192; emphasis in original). Rebelling against her mother's attitude, Ester determines that she will avoid marriage and romance in order to pursue her learning. "I am an empty vessel," she insists at several points, an affirmation that proves untrue when later she finds herself in bed with John Tillman (209). Even in the context of her own family history, Ester participates in a pattern

of female disruption that refuses to submit to tradition or repeat blindly what came before.

As Shakespeare's granddaughter, Ester brings this same disruptive quality to the larger world of philosophy. However, the creation of a biological tie between Ester and Shakespeare once again raises the unresolved problem of choice and determinism. For whereas Ester could *choose* to write under a false name, or *choose* to masquerade as Alvaro's wife, thereby fulfilling the basic terms of Kadish's idea of feminism as a choice, this possibility is erased in the case of paternity. Unlike a pseudonym or a mask, a biological connection, since it concerns Ester's very existence, cannot be erased or removed, nor can it be chosen. The implacability of this link thus reiterates the patriarchal law, which ineluctably reappropriates Ester to the role of Shakespeare's granddaughter. The transmutation of Shakespeare's hypothetical sister in Woolf into Kadish's imagining of Ester as Shakespeare's granddaughter is not a negligible change. For Woolf's example of a sister does not require an actual genetic connection, only a sense of basic social equivalency: a step-sister, or a female neighbor, would serve equally well as a point of comparison. It is by returning to the biological, to the patriarchal principle of lineage, that Kadish contradicts her own principle of feminism, insofar as lineage is not based on choice. Woolf's example of Shakespeare's sister drew its power from Judith's social equality to her brother, not their shared biology, whereas to be Shakespeare's granddaughter is to place Ester in the patriarchal position of tradition's dutiful granddaughter.

Yet this unsatisfactory conclusion encapsulates perfectly the unresolved tension between feminism and Jewish tradition that permeates *The Weight of Ink*, the inevitable ambivalence of having simultaneously been "chosen," as a Jew, while at the same time wanting, as a woman and a human being, to have a choice. Does not Derrida articulate a similar quandary in *Archive Fever* with regard to his own Jewishness, a problem that is exemplified by the personal decision as to whether to circumcise his sons, as well as his reading of Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi's *Freud's Moses: Judaism Terminable and Interminable* (1991)? Or indeed Freud himself who, as Yerushalmi explores in his book, felt the weight of his Jewish heritage strongly enough, despite his avowed atheism, to make it the focus of his final, idiosyncratic work *Moses and Monotheism* (1939). Spinoza, too, fits this pattern, a thinker who, as Goldstein contends, is staunchly Jewish even in his manner of breaking with that tradition. This same tension is felt in Jewish feminism, whether by mainstream activists like Gloria Steinem, or women operating in the confines of religion, such as Regina Jonas, the first female rabbi. In this respect, then, Kadish's novel joins a long line of precursors who have struggled with their own ambivalence about how to

reconcile the weight of Jewish tradition with the desire, feminist or otherwise, to choose for themselves.

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